

Book Review: Simone Claar, International Trade Policy and Class Dynamics in South Africa: The Economic Partnership Agreement (2018)

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Book Reviews

Simone Claar (2018), *International Trade Policy and Class Dynamics in South Africa: The Economic Partnership Agreement*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-3-319-65713-4 (hardback), 978-3-319-65714-1 (e-book), xv+244 pp.

In this interdisciplinary work, Simone Claar combines two important and still under-researched subjects in current African Studies. One relates to the social substrate generated by the unprecedented African growth period from the mid-1990s to about 2015, in particular with regard to modern capitalist classes, over and beyond the wider preoccupation with emerging middle classes in Africa. The other subject is the political economy that drives African negotiations of important trade agreements, in particular the controversial Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the European Union (EU).

The first issue had last been broadly discussed in the “Kenya Debate” of the 1970s: Has post-independence market expansion produced a class of indigenous capitalist entrepreneurs who, unlike a comprador bourgeoisie, do not simply depend on raw material export or the African state for their businesses to thrive, but conversely constitute themselves in effective business associations to effect market-friendly economic policy? What are the relevant factions within such a class? The Kenya Debate (which was to some degree also on Nigeria and other places) came to a halt after economic growth stalled in the early 1980s.

The second subject relates to the reasons for the country configurations and the final EPA treaties, which African negotiators accepted under EU pressure although both run counter to their interests of regional economic integration and indigenous manufacturing industrialisation, as this reviewer has long argued alongside civil society critics in Africa and Europe. One had to assume, but could not know for sure, that the economic interests of export-oriented agricultural entrepreneurs (and their workers) dominated in African decision-making – cocoa-processing interests in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, banana interests in Cameroon (as much as in the Caribbean), beef and grape-grower interests in Botswana and Namibia, horticulture interests in Kenya, and wider agro-export interests in South Africa, all of which were supposed to have pushed their governments to sign individual and subgroup EPAs in order to preserve the duty-free access of these middle-income countries to the EU market.

As we talk economic class interests, Simone Claar aptly chooses a neo-Marxist frame for her analysis, following Poulantzas's work of the 1970s, which allows her to take the various forces within the state and the relative autonomy of government and bureaucracy into consideration. She does it using the example of South Africa, where the constellation is particularly complicated by issues of race and by the fact that nominal representatives of what she calls the "popular classes" are at the helm, including a kind of communist party. The analysis is rich in detail and based on a series of field interviews (though, unfortunately, the author elaborates neither on the design of the interviews nor on the method of analysis) at two historical junctures: when the government of South Africa first refused (in 2007) and then agreed (in 2014) to sign an EPA, jointly with the other member states of the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and Mozambique. Content-wise, Claar is able to plausibly establish that most entrepreneurial factions in South Africa first feared deeper liberalisation in services and investment, foreseen in the 2007 draft, but were appeased by the removal of the respective chapters from the final text of the agreement.

Unfortunately, the underlying Marxist "class analysis" does not add much to the established wisdom on groups of South African entrepreneurs and how they make their voices heard. The author largely redefines if not relabels the usual economic groups as "capitalist class fractions," without much value added: mining capital, manufacturing capital, finance and banking, and agricultural capital, subdivided into black and white populations (while leaving out coloured communities as well as other ethnic/cultural groups) and being differently represented in political parties, business associations, and the state apparatus. Even the issue of whether the well-known Minerals–Energy Complex (MEC) with its ramifications in manufacturing and finance still runs South Africa is not significantly deepened by the case study. Unsurprisingly, Claar underlines in the conclusion that the MEC still dominates South African capitalism, but she does not adequately detail historical changes in the *modus operandi*, apart from recent competition (or collusion?) with Zuma-dependent "crony capitalism." At least the reader can trace how factional business interests translate into a more market-liberal orientation, or what the author schematically calls a "protectionist" stance. In the end, the relabelling makes for a somewhat old-fashioned Marxist woodcut where everything appears as either class struggle or class alliance with the purpose of influencing the "ruling political class," a phrase that, in itself, is used in a somewhat contradictory manner in the context of Marxist analysis. Suffice it to say that a lot of empirical material for further politi-

cal or sociological analysis can be found in her text, *inter alia* on the contradictory and in the end rather passive stance of trade unions on the matter.

One issue that clearly needs further academic analysis beyond Claar's results relates to the EPAs and the future of regional integration in Africa. The dominating economic forces at the Cape have accepted the so-called "SADC EPA" of just six Southern African Development Community (SADC) states alongside an "Eastern and Southern Africa EPA" with another four SADC states on decidedly different terms and conditions, whilst a further six SADC member states are not covered. This discrepancy is not treated at all in the book under review although it amounts to an obvious scandal for a European Commission pretending to support regional integration in Africa. Does this mean that Business South Africa at large has *de facto* given up on the prospects of market integration on the SADC platform; if so, what is the strategic reasoning behind this?

■ Helmut Asche